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SHORT GRASS COUNTRY

By Monte Noelke

In the early part of the '50s a rancher up north of the Shortgrass Country issued an invitation to fish on his catch tanks in exchange for gathering his yearlings. Fall rains freshened the country and flushed the tanks to the point of overflowing.

After we'd helped him work his cattle, we caught a big mess of fish. One morning I stepped off a creek bank into a chest-deep sink of quicksand, using up about 20 seconds to lose part of my fishing gear and all of my dignity.

At the last special cow sale in San Angelo, memories of that long-ago close call kept flashing up on my screen. Dehydrated range cows stood in muddy corrals in a cold, misty haze. Ring starters made urgent pleas for bids; consignors searched the audience for hope. Heavy-bred and short-bred and calved-out cattle passed across the block on a fragile market that would have made a North Texas sandbank seem like the granite cornerstone of the Capitol building at Austin.

Our cattle had an official shipping and sorting shrink of 36 hours yard time, plus a 2.5-month intensive drought hide and body disfiguration to fully advertise the present owner was at the end of his trail.

Herders passing by to the rest rooms and the telephone booths stared straight ahead. Orange plastic seats in the sales ring tilted back too far, and couches out in the main lobby leaned too far forward.

Hombres out on the catwalk looked plenty colorful, wearing yellow riding slickers and black rubber overboots. I asked a couple of guys hanging on the rail, studying a pen of dark red heifers with a sprinkling of those eye-catching tiger-stripes, what the odds were of investing in cattle as a second career.

The oldest of the two nodded, the one who looked like his brother acted more absorbed in studying the backs of the red and brindle cattle than messing with a dude. Glancing toward Pens 328 and 329 where the ranch's cows were humped up, and looking about as woebegone as a hollow horn can be, I continued, "Sure is a shame the old rancher who owns those black cows over there hadn't kept up the papers and been so modest about what his calves weighed."

Inside, the cow sale was starting. The younger fellow raised up and said; “Noelke, are those your cows, or your brother Walter’s, or some of your cousin Hal’s?”

Playing along acting like you are being fooled is a dirty trick and destroys your faith in your fellow man.

The sale cooled and had heat spells. I left for home vowing I was going to start back hanging out at the old drug store on Main Street, where the fellows wearing black hats and high topped boots drive laundry trucks and potato chip vans, and the waitresses don’t call you “honey” because they feel sorry for you.